

Sermon for the 14th Sunday after Pentecost (A)
Trinity Church, September 18, 2011
Matthew 20:1-16

“It’s not fair!”

The complaint echoes from the schoolyard to family arbitrations, to equalization boards, to a million workplaces, and to the halls of national government. I saw it acted out yesterday on the sideline of a televised football game. “It’s not fair!”

The parables of Jesus are so true to ordinary human life, so well crafted, that just about everybody can say, “I’ve been there, done that.” Professor Alderink, in his excellent presentation to the Life-long Learning group two weeks ago, reminded his audience that Jesus didn’t write the Gospels. Nobody was taking notes when he was teaching. Rather, his words were set down later by some extremely talented and inspired narrators who recreated Jesus’ words in a way that made them come to life.

The parable we have just read is about the moral dimensions of the kingdom of heaven. It is about God. That’s the way it begins: “The kingdom of heaven is like this . . .”

There is a landowner, and his vineyard needs tending, so he goes out early in the morning and hires laborers from the marketplace and they agree on the usual wage for a day’s work. Every community, no matter where it is, still has its way of coming to a general consensus about a fare wage for their workers; so there is an agreement on the daily wage. Mid morning there is a need for more workers, so more are hired on. This time there’s no mention of a daily wage or any pro-rating of it, only, “I’ll pay you what’s right.” The landowner does the same again around noon, in the middle of the afternoon and then again when it’s almost quitting time.

At the end of the working day, the landowner gathers the laborers to give them their pay. To the ones who put in the whole working day he pays the agreed-upon wage. To the ones who put in a half day, Lo and behold! he gives them a full day’s pay, and even the ones who came at the very last hour got the full amount. And what did the ones who worked all day say, and even angrily? And I strongly suspect that some of you are making the same judgement.

“It’s not fair!”

This challenging parable may be the most provocative of Jesus' teaching, and it makes some serious demands on you and on me. Jesus' teachings always make demands on the mind and the imagination, but this one is especially so. It made the same demands on Jesus first disciples, because it left them -- and us -- not with an answer, but with a relentlessly searching question. In the end, it forces us to adopt a frame of mind that is entirely different from all that our rational civilization has taught us to take for granted.

If the landowner in the story is God, Just how "fair" is God? And if God's supremely generous benevolence results in good things happening to bad people, what about the good people that suffer bad things? The end of the lesson is a declaration, but all that it does is rub in the question: "So the last shall be first, and the first last." How "fair" is that?

What is in play, here, is the tension between the expectations of human common sense, the ordinary understanding of fairness and justice, and the morality of God's kingdom, of God's justice, of God's generosity. The Jews had the same problem and Jesus' teaching had its roots in his Jewish religion. Didn't the line in the First Lesson jolt you just a little? "God changed his mind!" He had promised vengeance and he granted mercy. And Jonah, who had risked his life to carry the message, was greatly displeased. Why didn't you just do that in the first place? **It isn't fair!** It is the same plot as Jesus' parable.

Generations of Jews and Christians, have performed all sorts of mental gymnastics in an attempt to bend the ordinary common sense notions of justice and the mysterious generosity of God into some semblance of a fit. No attempt has ever been entirely satisfactory. Jesus himself didn't try to resolve the dilemma.

What Jesus did in the parable was to undermine the ordinary taken-for-granted notion of fairness, a notion based on some system of reward and punishment, and open up an entirely different way of looking at the God, the world and each other. There is a wonderful irony in the fact that workers complain about their employer's generosity, the same irony that shows up in Jonah's complaint. The workers are the voice of the old and ordinary systems of reward and punishment that pass as fairness. The vineyard-owner's reply is shocking: Why do you begrudge my generosity? Is it right for you to be angry?

It is devastating to religion when faith boils down to a system of requirements and rewards and religious duties, however rational and even beautiful they may seem

to be. Jesus knows, God knows, and certainly we know that we have to live and work and make our way in the structures of economy and society that history has given us; and that is true of all human beings. But we don't have to swallow whole hog and uncritically, the values that our culture applauds: achievement, affluence, social esteem. That the last shall be first and the first last, is Jesus way of saying that our values be up-ended and be replaced by a first hand, face to face relationship with God. The gospel of Jesus, the Good News, is that there is a way of living and thinking and spiritual being that moves beyond the values and behaviors that our conventional wisdom, the common sense that our culture tries to force upon us. He asks that we reshape ourselves from within. St. Paul wrote it to the Romans: "Don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. . . . The *Message* Bible puts it more pungently:

Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going to work and walking around life – and place it before God as an offering. . . . Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention upon God. You'll be changed from within.

Jesus did not argue that justice and injustice in the world is something we simply have to accept and live with. Quite the opposite. In his message, the life of the spirit, and the things that go on in the everyday world are not split apart. The transformation Jesus taught and lived is a process whose main quality is compassion. He does not argue that we need to discard the procedures that communities develop to arrive at a compassionate society, but to get behind those procedures to their compassionate purposes, so that the forms become the tools, and not the end in themselves, and that by being transformed ourselves, we become the instruments, working like the leaven in the bread, to transform the world.

The gospel of Jesus, the message of his parable – and all of his parables and sayings – is that that the way of transformation leads from a life that is conditioned by our surroundings, a life that is pre-occupied with measuring up to requirements in all sorts of ways, religious and non-religious; from a life enmeshed in the demands of a society where we are constantly watching our backs, to a life that is centered in God. And being centered in God, rather than the self, the way of transformation leads from a life of harried pressure and anxiety to a life of freedom and trust and peace. This is the Gospel of Christ.

